

Museum of London Archaeology Service

AN EXAMINATION OF TEST-PITS AT 258-262 BELSIZE RD, NW6

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1. Introduction

The excavation of three engineer's test pits at the above address provided an opportunity to make a preliminary appraisal of the extent of archaeological deposits within the area of the proposed redevelopment. It was agreed that the examination did not amount to a controlled archaeological evaluation of the whole site, and that it only constituted an inquiry of the potential for survival of any archaeological deposits at all. This followed a bore-hole test (undertaken by other contractors) which apparently indicated modern made ground over geological clay deposits.

2. Method

The sections of the previously excavated test-pits were freed of any demolition material, and hand cleaned by the archaeologist. Sketch sections were recorded in all three pits, and any strata described in note form on those sections. The sections were located by triangulation from clear points located precisely on the architect's survey of the site. The level of each stratum was determined by measuring down from the (extant) concrete floor of the former building. This had been levelled previously on the survey. It is accepted that a small error can be assumed for the heights given in this report. This is thought to be no more than $\pm 0.05\text{m}$. As the test pits were already excavated, no scale plans were made of any archaeological deposit.

In addition, some documentary research was undertaken, chiefly to elucidate the former uses to which the site had been put since cartographic records began. Appended to this report are photocopies of certain maps with the site location high-lighted. In particular, references to the excavation in 1850 of presumed monastic remains directly adjacent to Kilburn (London and North-West) railway station were followed up.

3. Results of the Examination

All three test-pit sections indicated similar stratigraphic development. This has been provisionally defined as:

- a) A thick deposit of sticky orange/grey clay containing occasional pea grits and displaying signs of root action. This was seen extending from c.33.30m above Ordnance Datum (hereafter OD) in test-pit 2 (hereafter TP2 etc.), down below 32.46m OD (TP1). Comparison of the top of this deposit in all three trenches suggests a slope down from west to east of approximately 1 in 25.
- b) A slightly silty clay, grading from orange-grey to grey brown at its highest level, overlay deposit (a). It ranged between 0.05m thick (TP3) and 0.14m (TP1) and also sloped west-east, from 33.35m OD (TP3) to 33.07m OD (TP2).
- c) A well-sorted mid grey-brown silty, slightly sandy, clay containing occasional flint pebbles, charcoal flecks, coal flecks, glazed pottery, clay pipe stems, and brick and roof tile fragments. This layer appeared to slope north-south, from 33.55m OD (TP1) to 33.25 OD (TP2), but as it had been truncated by levelling activities for the former building on the site, and thus did not appear in TP3 at all, it may formerly have followed the west-east trend.
- d) Made ground for the former building occupying this site, consisting of redeposited clay and silts, brick rubble, concrete and hardcore. A brick drain with a square section was found to cut this material in TP1 (see sketch section).

The preliminary interpretation for this site is as follows:

- (a) represents naturally laid clay forming the subsoil in this area.
- (b) represents a weathered horizon, probably formed by the impact of environmental and biological agents on the surface of (a).
- (c) represents a more thoroughly worked horizon, probably an agricultural deposit, containing material of possibly medieval and certainly post-medieval date.
- (d) represents levelling for building activities on the site in the post-medieval or modern period.

4. The Early History of Kilburn in Brief

The name Kilburn probably derives from Old English *Kyle* meaning 'cold' and *Burn*, meaning 'stream'. This relates to the Kilburn stream that flows from Hampstead Heath, down through the Serpentine, and enters the Thames at Chelsea (Barton, 1982). The settlement arose on the line of the ancient Roman road of Watling Street, now Edgware Road, and Kilburn High Road. The antiquity of the settlement is unknown, but predates 1130, when the priory of Kilburn was founded. Possible Romano-British pottery was

recovered in 1853 during rail works, suggesting a very early date for settlement in the vicinity.

The priory was founded as a cell of Westminster Abbey, dedicated to St John the Baptist, which had held the Manor of Hampstead from 971 (Bailey in TLAMAS 39, 1988, 177). It may have been founded on the site of a spring; one was certainly known of by 1714. It was founded as a religious house for Augustinian nuns. This is curious in that Westminster Abbey was a Benedictine house. A hermit who already lived on the site was placed in charge over the nuns. Three former maids-of-honour to Queen Maud, wife of Henry I, became some of the first nuns.

The practice of placing a male in charge of the nuns seems to have died by 1207, when prioress Alice is mentioned in records (V.C.H. 1, 1969, p.179). This caused the Bishops of London some problems and they were recorded as interfering in the running of the house before 1229. The Abbot of Westminster and the Bishop of London settled in court that there should be a secular priest and a prioress in charge, and that the Abbot should administer selections of both, ratifying them with the Bishop (V.C.H. 1, 1969, p.179). Both Abbot and Bishop were to enjoy rights of visitation, but the latter could only pray or hear confessions. It may be inferred from this that the guest quarters were of some reasonable size at the priory. Other connections between the two religious houses are unclear, although a story is recounted that the Abbot and monks of Westminster, hearing a prophecy of their doom in a great flood of the Thames, removed themselves to Kilburn until the tide had (uneventfully) passed (Besant 1902, 113).

The endowments of the priory included gifts from Westminster Abbey to enable the nuns to take care of corrodians. These were effectively pensioners who lived in the priory as if it were a religious old folk's home. The allowances were 40 gallons of beer and 28 loaves of bread in 1535. This suggests that the priory had several tenements inhabited by such corrodians. Other forms of income came from lands and rents spread over a wide area including London, Middlesex, Buckinghamshire, Kent, Surrey and Essex. Alms came from successive monarchs; Henry III gave #4 for robes for 20 nuns and 2 sisters in 1239 (although it has been considered that this figure may never have been achieved: V.C.H. 1, 1969, p.180). The dormitory, and therefore probably the whole conventual arrangement of the priory, may well have been able to accomodate such a number.

The nuns seem to have been composed of daughters of wealthy Londoners, in a similar manner to the other 12th-century London Augustinian nunneries at St Mary Clerkenwell, and St John the Baptist, Shoreditch. Bequests and wills formed the last main type of income for the nunnery, many from such wealthy familial connections.

In addition to the nuns, sisters and corrodians, various other staff were recorded including a chaplain, a steward, a receiver, farm-workers, a carter, a ploughman, a barleyman, a thresher and several other men and women whose functions were not specified. The majority of these would have lived in the precinct of the priory. From this we may infer a series of farm buildings such as

a granary, barn, storehouse, stable etc, as well as living quarters for the staff.

As for the layout of the priory inner court, there was an inventory made in 1536 indicating the following chambers.

- 1) The Hall
- 2) Chamber next to the Church (13)
- 3) Middle Chamber adjoining (2) and the Prioresses Chamber (4)
- 4) Prioress' Chamber adjoining (3) and (6)
- 5) Buttery, Pantry and Cellar
- 6) Prioress' Inner Chamber adjoining (4)
- 7) Chamber adjoining (4) and the Hall (1)
- 8) Kitchen
- 9) Larderhouse
- 10) Brewhouse (with a mill) & Bakehouse (with a furnace)
- 11) Three chambers for Hinds/Husbandmen & Chaplain
- 12) Confessor's Chamber
- 13) Church

There was also an orchard and a cemetery.

The nunnery was Dissolved by Henry VIII in 1536, and was recorded prior to that as having a gross revenue of #86-7-11. The site of the priory was first acquired by the Knights Hospitaller, and then disposed of to the Earl of Sussex by Henry VIII following the disbanding of the Knights in 1541, and then the Earl of Warwick in 1546 (Dugdale 1821 edn, 3, 428).

The village of Kilburn probably benefitted from the presence of the priory, and also from the increasing importance of London as a market place which brought ever-increasing volumes of traffic down the Edgware Road. Inns such as the Red Lion and the Cock are known on the frontage from the 1400s, catering for the travellers. Much of the land around the village was owned by the priory as were a number of properties in it. It is possible that, as with other nunneries, the priory church also acted as a parish chapel; the village itself was within the parish of Hampstead.

After the Dissolution of the monasteries, the priory buildings appear to have vanished fairly quickly. The chancel of the church, rather curiously, appears to have been the last part of that building to be demolished as it was mentioned in 1550. By the time Kilburn Wells became a fashionable spa in the mid-18th century, only one building was left standing, probably part of the domestic range of the priory. The location of the spring that formed the spa was nearby the Bell Inn, later the Bell Tavern, and a plaque at first floor level on the corner of Belsize Road and Kilburn High Road recorded the spot where the spring arose. Its location has also been described as adjoining a cottage at the corner of Station Road (probably Belsize Road), in a brick reservoir 5' in diameter and 12' deep, inscribed with the date 1714 (Walford 1897 - Kilburn).

5. The Site in its Historical Context

There is always a problem in predicting exactly where the limits of a monastic institution such as Kilburn priory lay. This is especially true of sites that have been heavily developed later on, as there are no opportunities to examine crop-marks or earthworks that might exist. Furthermore, the inner court of a monastery, where the main buildings were, was often much smaller than the outer court, comprising the whole precinct or land directly attached to the priory, so identifying the precinct need not necessarily lead to location of the main buildings.

Only one "excavation" has previously occurred on the site of Kilburn Priory. This was as a result of the widening of the London and North-West railway from 2- to 4-track in 1850. Workers disclosed foundations near to the station on the north side, and retrieved coins, numerous decorative pavement tiles, keys of a curious gothic shape, human bones, and a bell clapper (Arch. Journal, 10, 1853, p.65; Walford 1897). Previously, the priory had been assumed to lie either to east of Kilburn High Road, north of the railway, and west of the Kilburn brook (e.g. V.C.H. 1, 1969, 179), or in one instance, some 100m to the east (Sites & Monuments Record, no. 081797).

The type of archaeological activity in evidence in the engineer's test-pits does not initially appear to correspond to the hypothesis that the priory lay adjacent to Kilburn High Road. Cartographic evidence was thus examined to see if the location of the priory could be more precisely determined. Maps consulted included Rocque (1746, 1754), Greenwood (1827), Stanford (1862), Ordnance Survey 25":1 mile (1870), and OS (1894). Copies of Rocque, Greenwood and OS 1894 are included at the end of this report (Stanford and OS 1870 are reference works over 100 years old and cannot be photocopied). The first thing that shows on Rocque 1746 is that Belsize Road is an original thoroughfare, and that the dog-leg was formed at the location of a ford or bridge across the Kilburn stream. If the Bell Inn was on the corner of this lane and Kilburn High Road as suggested by the location of the spring, spa and later Tavern, then the lane shown on Rocque must have existed in some form by 1600 at the latest, the earliest known date of the Inn. It would not be unreasonable to conclude that there may be remains of this possibly 16th-century establishment, or its outbuildings in ground to the rear of the (probably) basemented frontage of Belsize Road. The illustrated domestic building of the priory was said in 1814 to have stood on a "rising bank" in a field, called Abbey Fields in 1805 (Lambert 1805) and near the spa and drinking house of Kilburn Wells (a.k.a the Bell Tavern). Archaeological examination indicates that 258-262 Belsize Road has a pronounced downward slope away from the site of the Tavern spring and towards the line of the Kilburn brook. Map OS 1894 shows that the ground then rises substantially out of the stream-bed by approximately 4m in 80m. This would imply that the domestic structure lay to the east of the Kilburn brook, and not to the west as has been maintained previously (V.C.H, 179). If it lay to the west, it would be in the same position as the contemporaneous Kilburn Wells/Bell Tavern, an impossibility.

This suggestion is greatly strengthened by a detailed examination of the OS 1870 map. The road known as Kilburn Priory crosses over the London and North-West railway some 120m east of the site. On its north-eastern corner is shown St Mary School, erected on the site of Kilburn Priory. The station serving Kilburn is shown as being adjacent to this bridge. The confusion about the site of the railway discoveries described above stems from the fact that Kilburn High Road station is clearly shown on OS 1894, having moved about 180m to the west in the intervening 23 years.

So, it appears that the priory buildings and inner court lie some 60-100m to the west of the site at 258-262 Belsize Road. However, the area formerly occupied by the priory precinct was likely much larger. Belsize Road was called Kilburn Abbey Lane on Rocque 1746, and seems to peter out just east of the Kilburn stream where there are three dispersed buildings, labelled 'Kilborn Abbey'. It seems likely that Belsize Road was therefore the lane that led to the priory. If the precinct of the priory began on the east side of the Kilburn, then it would be a reasonable assumption that the stream marked the western edge of the precinct. It seems more likely that the precinct included the stream (for milling, drinking water and for use as a continuously flushing latrine system as found in many other monastic sites), and that Belsize Road began as the lane from the priory gate through orchards and arable land in the outer precinct right up to the central complex. The possibility of outer court buildings would, in this case, be real. The continued use of 258-262 Belsize Road for nothing more than agriculture would result in a deposit just like that found and described above (see 3 (c)). The priory gate would then front onto the Kilburn High Road, in a similar manner to the way other Augustinian nunneries around London. The gate would then be on the site of the later Bell Inn, and may have been incorporated it. It is therefore possible that the foundations of the buildings closer to the High Road may incorporate or overlie the medieval gateway, the 16th-17th century Inn, and/or such associated structures as have been found elsewhere near monastic gates like a porter's lodge or almonry. The site 258-262 Belsize Road may have been agricultural land right up to the 1880s: it appears as open land in 1870, and has been built upon by 1894.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

It has been argued above that the core of the priory of St John the Baptist at Kilburn lies between 70m and 100m due east of the site under consideration. It has also been argued that the precinct of the priory may extend as far west as Kilburn High Road, and that if a gatehouse existed, it might be at or near the junction between Belsize Road and Kilburn High road. This same area then became the Bell Inn, the Bell Tavern and also the drinking spot and spa known as Kilburn Wells. According to the Greenwood 1827 map, the site lies on some of the buildings of Kilburn Wells.

Therefore, in addition to any undocumented prehistoric or Saxon activities and the presence of Romano-British pottery, there remains some reason to undertake a controlled evaluation on the site of 258-262 Belsize Road. However, the basements will have certainly removed any features directly on the frontage, and as the strata are rising to the west, some degree of truncation of those strata due to terracing is inevitable (and has been noted in TP3). The damage caused by post-medieval ploughing/cultivation will be least along the deeper, eastern side of the site and the north-east corner of the site, where the risk of terracing appears to be much reduced. It would also be advisable to test for survival of the rear of any structures along the frontage of Belsize Road.

As very nearly the whole site is still covered by a thick concrete floor, provision should be made to break this out in any areas of further work.

7. Bibliography

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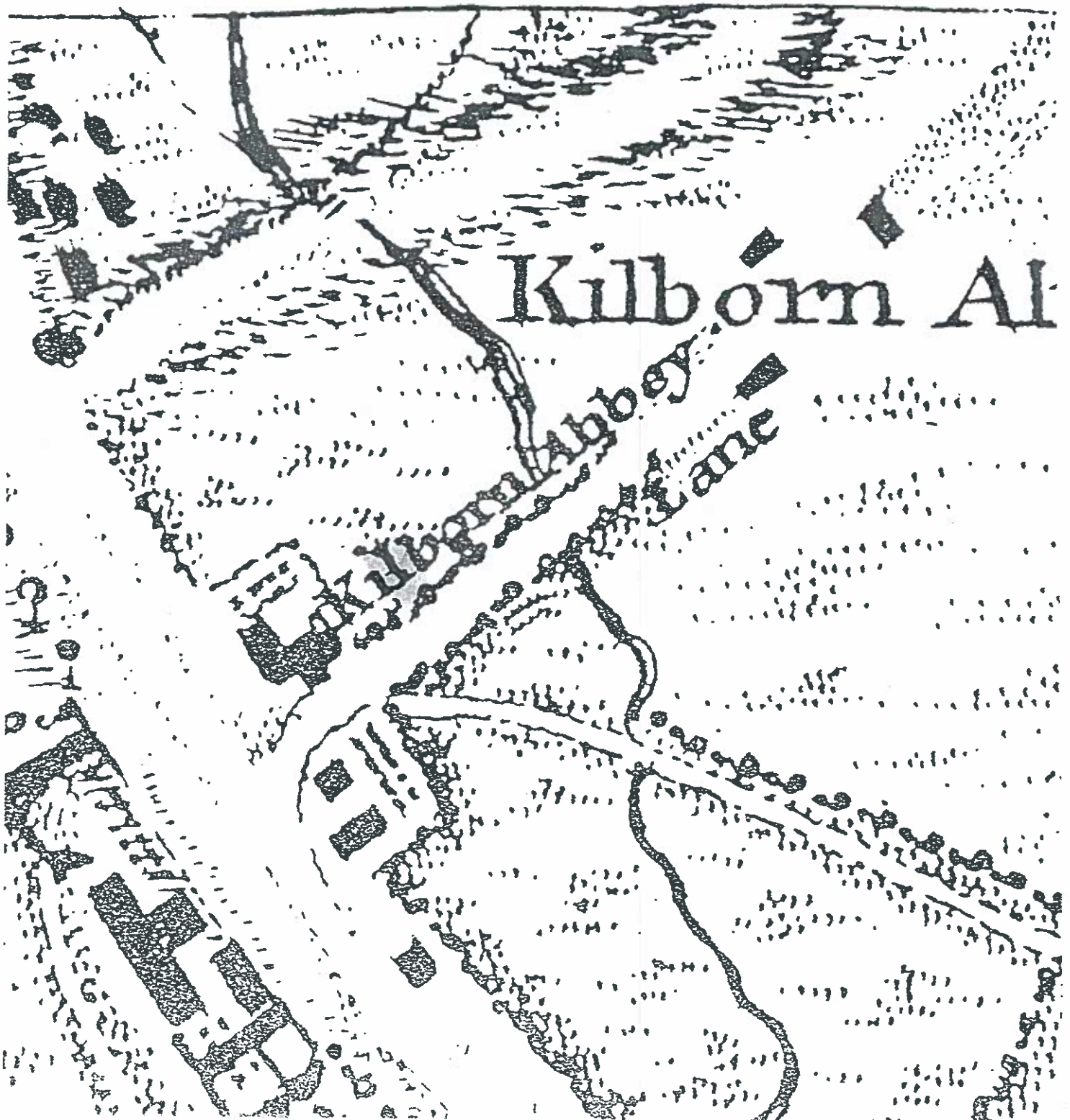
8. Acknowledgements

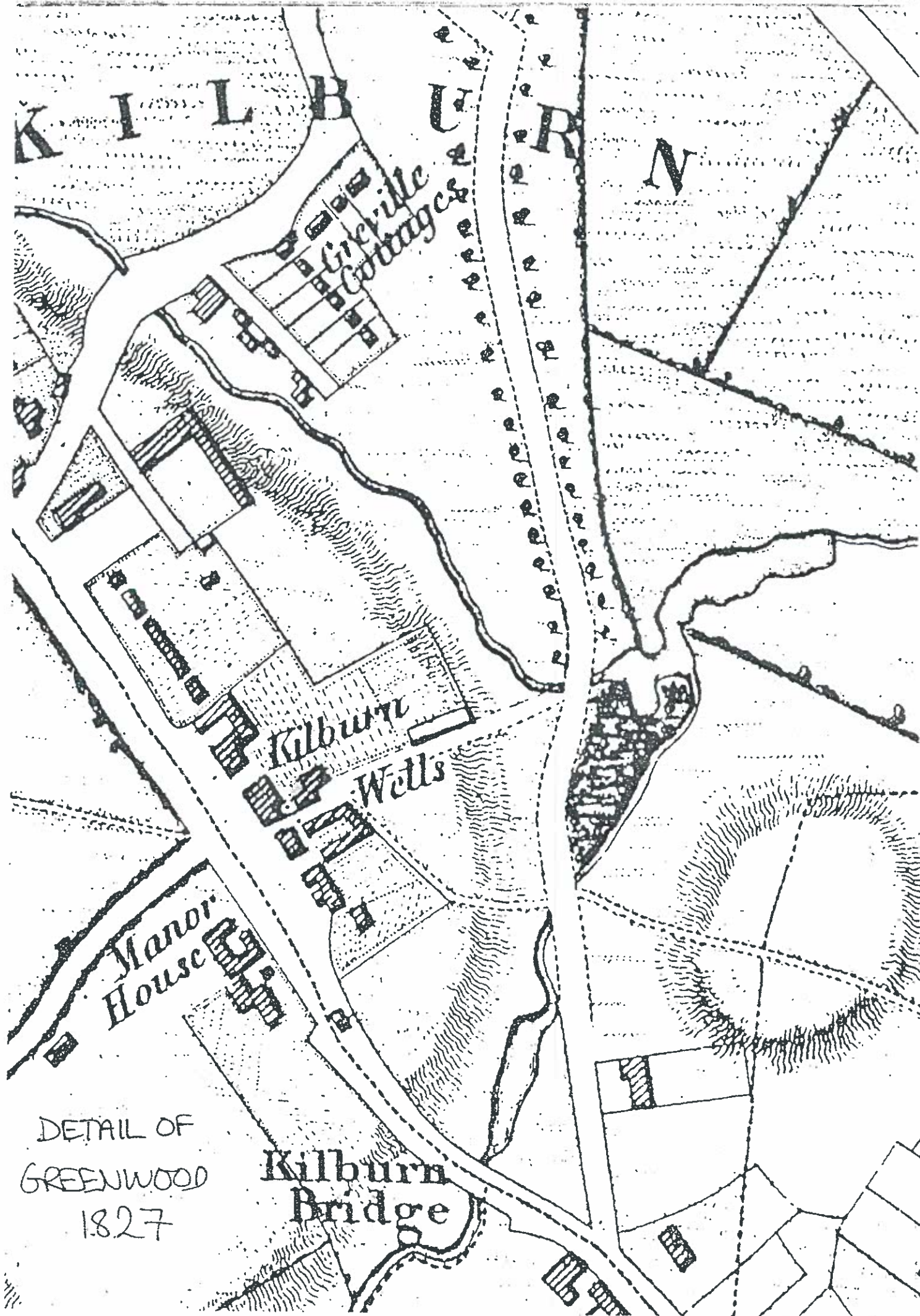
I would like to thank Javed Ahadpour for his hospitality and assistance on this project.

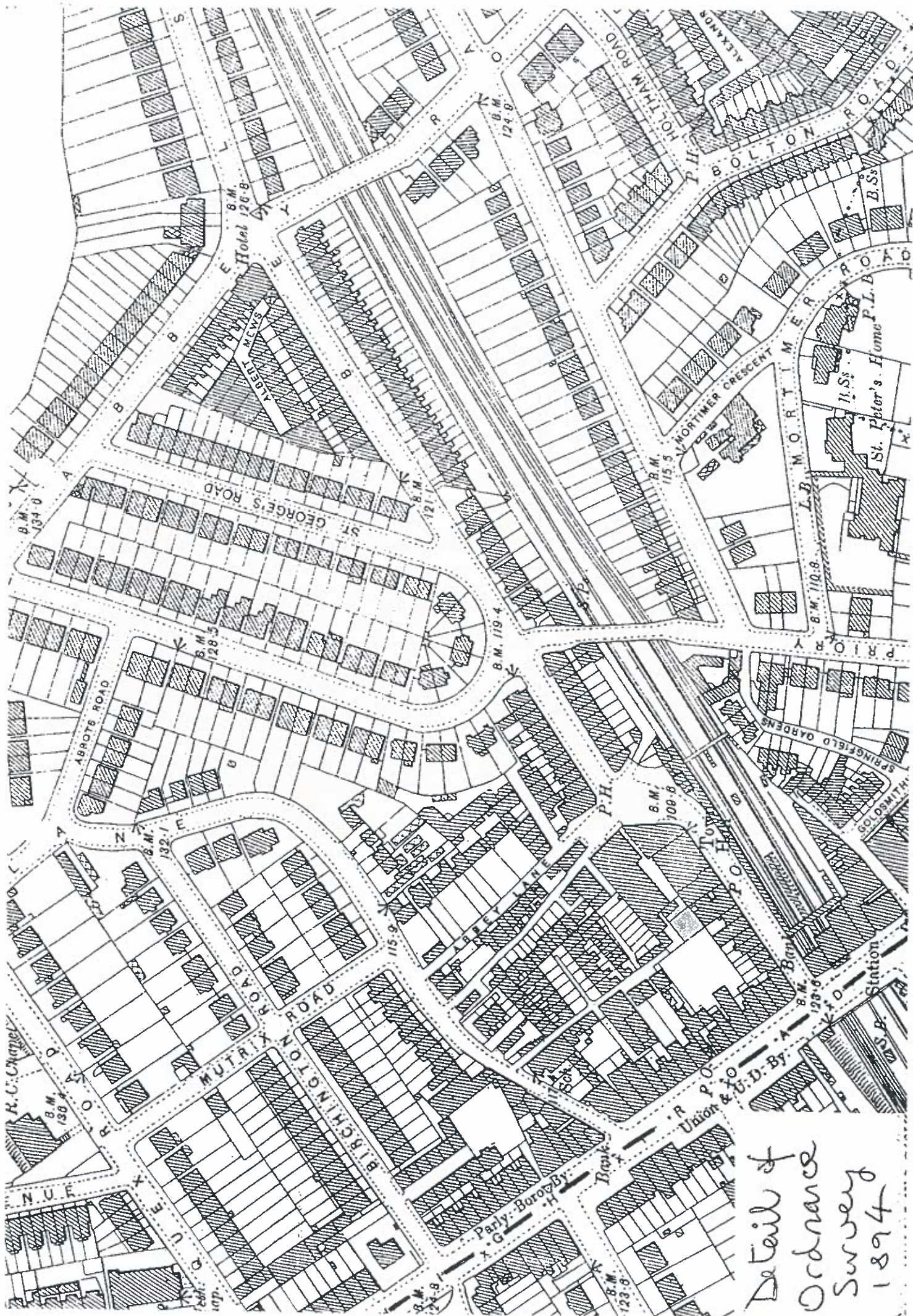
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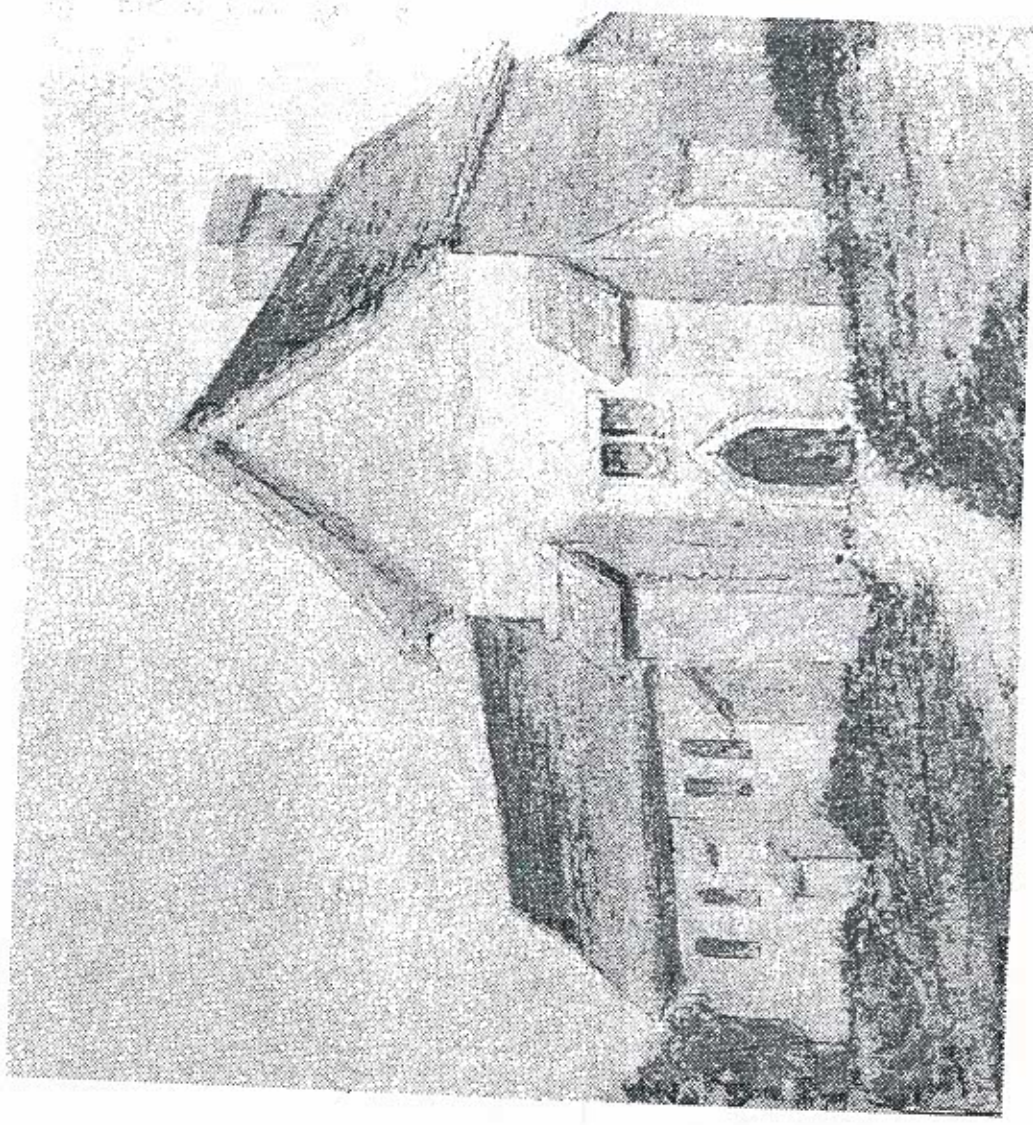
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258-262
BELSIZE ROAD



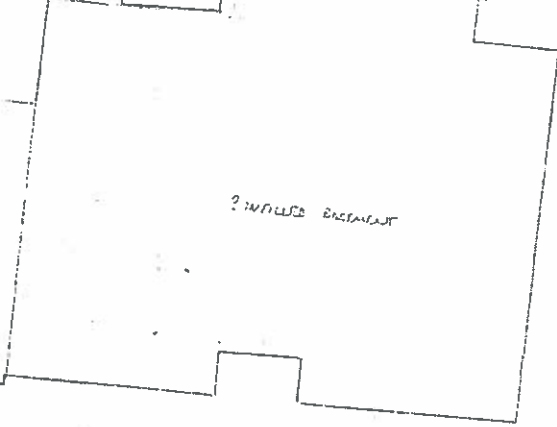
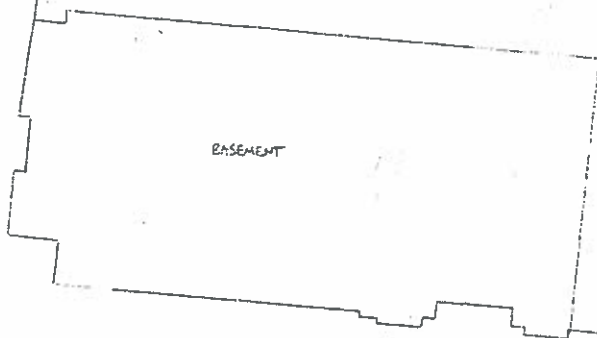
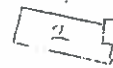
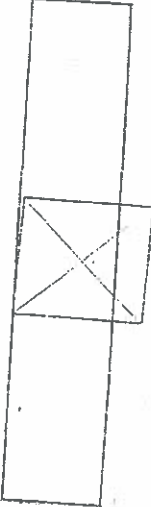
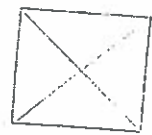
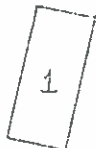
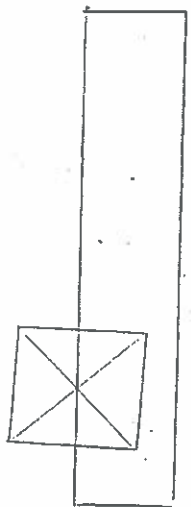




Detail of
Ordnance
Survey
1894



Kilburn Priory c.1750



PAVEMENT

BELSIZE ROAD

SZR93 - 254.262 BELSIZE RD, KILBURN
 (POLY) PLAN AFTER DEMOLITION 1:100
 1 = ENGINEER'S TEST PIT EXAMINED FOR ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVIVAL
 X = ORIGINAL PROMISED TEST PITS
 = " " TRENCHES
 BASED ON SOME PROPOSED DRAWING 8/8000/51005

